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THE BIG GAMBLE OF LILLORD COBB



Design specialist Lillard Cobb (r.), conferring with partner, John Herbert, is founder-president of Mechanical Developments, Inc., Riverside, Calif., maker of machine parts and tools.

Californian starts his own plant after a long career as top machine designer and engineer

THE future seemed bright for 42-year-old Lillard Cobb in August 1966. A machine design specialist with 16 years in the field under his belt, his career had soared steadily upward since coming to Lockheed Propulsion Corp. in 1960. He had started as a design engineer, become supervisor of a machine tool design group a year later moved up to chief tool engineer. However, Detroit-born Cobb had his sights set on bigger things which, unfortunately for Lockheed, didn't include the giant aircraft and missile maker.

Cobb junked the steady pay, security and good promotion chances at Lockheed for the perils of becoming an entrepreneur in a field

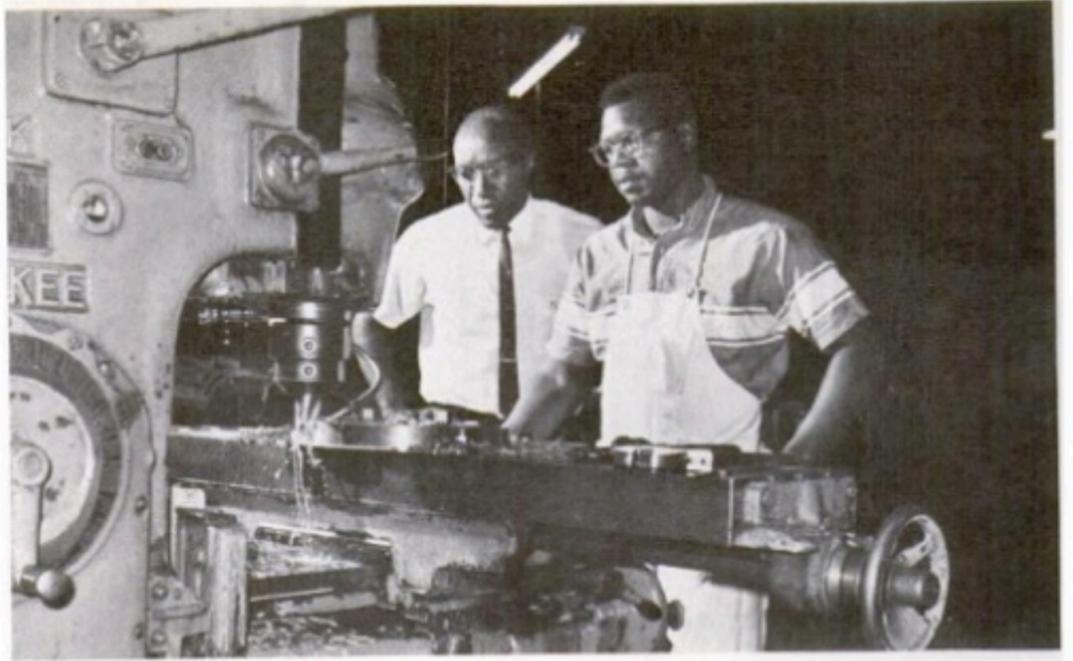
where the odds against success were stacked doubly high. He pulled together a small work force, scraped up what capital he could and opened his own company, Mechanical Developments, Inc., in Riverside, Calif. A rugged individualist as well as realist, Cobb knew competition was great, experienced workers were few, money was scarce and being black certainly didn't make matters better. Though the mortality rate among small businesses was alarmingly high, Cobb's great gamble paid off. In a year's time, he has done an estimated \$80 thousand in business with about 20 customers, several of them among the nation's industrial giants and biggest government contractors.

MDI makes parts used in various kinds of machines, aircraft, missiles, commercial pumps and drills. If plans materialize, production will eventually be expanded to the designing and building of machines. Lockheed, his old employer, buys MDI-made mechanical components for research. Universal Propulsion, another missile research and development giant, buys small rocket motor cases. To purchasing agents in the aerospace-automotive field, the word is out: Cobb's MDI "can do the job."

In the aeronautics idiom, the young company's liftoff, although rocky at first, is now proceeding smoothly. With the steady hand of Cobb charting its course, the rest of the journey is bound to be just as smooth.

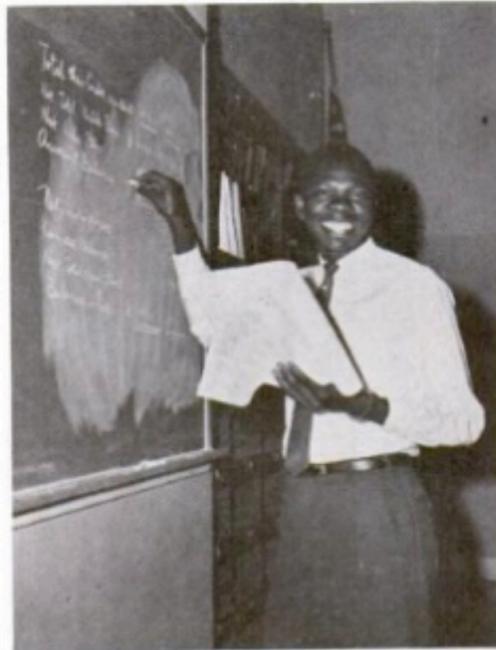
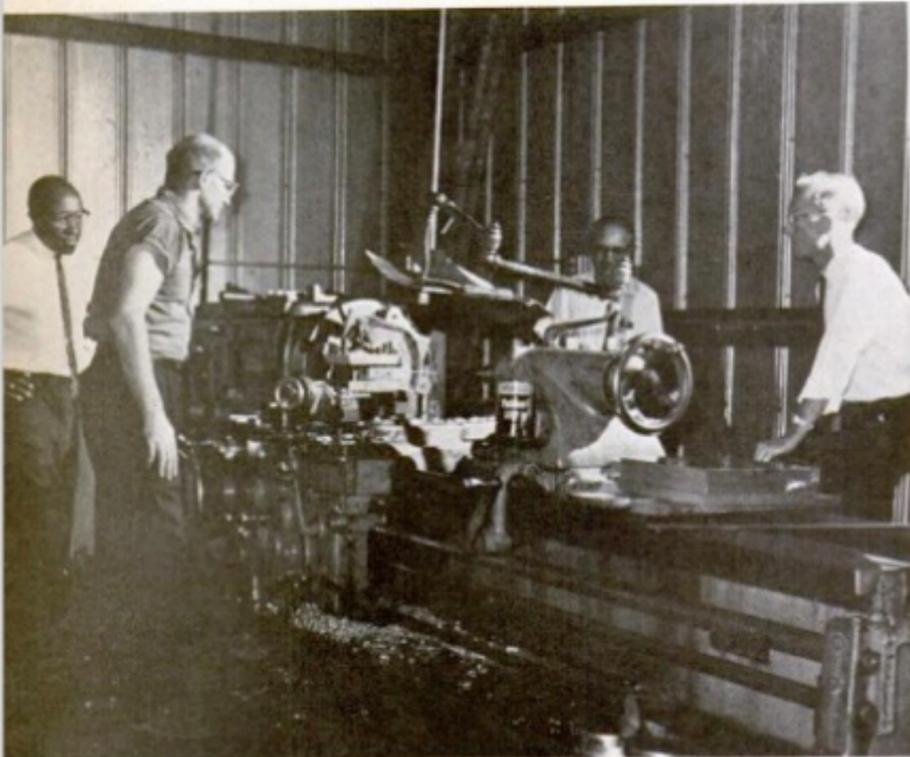


Cobb (4th, r.) shares a coffee break with eight of MDI's 15 employees. Due to its liberal policy, people have been hired despite problems such as inexperience in machine tooling, one man's speech impediment, another's inability to understand English.



Riverside's Mayor Ben Lewis and Cobb observe a grinding operation. Some of MDI's customers, like Lockheed, the Martin Co. and Universal Propulsion, are major U.S. government contractors.

Once considered a hardcore unemployed, Ruben Sneed now operates an MDI vertical mill. He is the only one of seven trainees, sent to Cobb by the Urban League, still employed by company.



Riverside Junior College student Alfred Ogunkamaiya of Nigeria works at night as a part-time maintenance man. He expects to complete studies in December.



Going about cleanup chores, Ogunkamaiya came to U.S. in 1965, was hired when his savings ran out and odd jobs didn't produce enough money to pay expenses.

Cobb and workers check a machine's functioning. MDI specializes in making parts for aircraft, missiles, commercial pumps, other machines. Within a year or so, Cobb hopes to begin designing and building machines.



MDI's entire operation is housed in a one-story, 5,000-square-foot building in downtown Riverside. Cobb leases the structure, does not own it. His main improvement has been the installation of air conditioning.

Herbert and Cobb check cast made by applying polyurethane, a chemical used in space research, to surgical gauze. The application was devised by a Riverside Negro physician, Dr. James Mitchell. MDI hopes to manufacture cast for medical use.





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Sports are a "must" for the Cobb family—five boys, one girl. Lillard played baseball and basketball in trade school and college; also played baseball in Canada several summers, was offered, but turned down, a contract from the Brooklyn Dodgers.

MOVED BY CREATIVE DRIVE, COBB DIDN'T

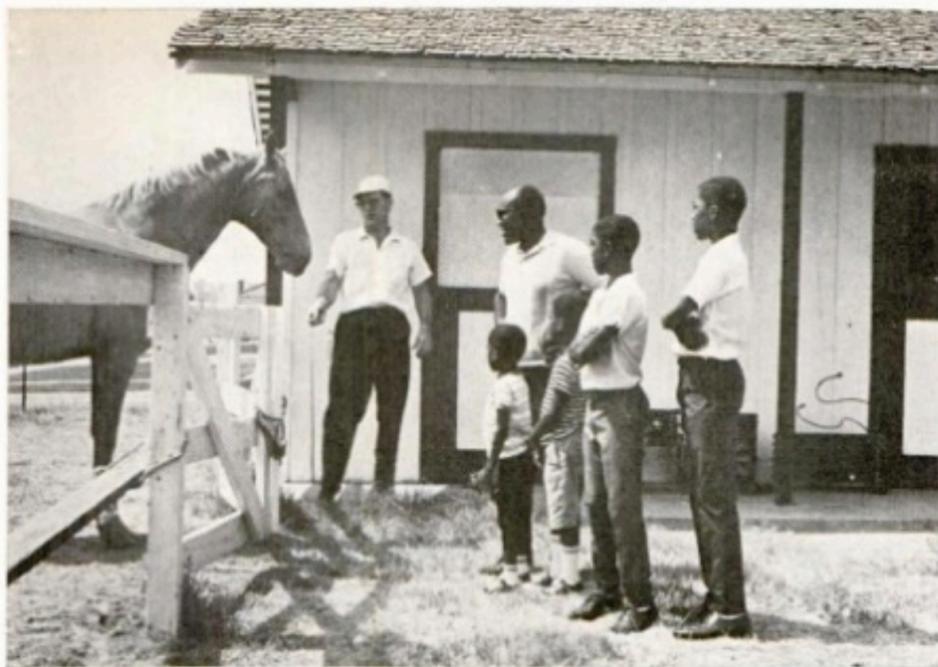
COMPARED TO America's mightiest industrial combines, MDI is a mere babe. Housed in an old bottling plant, which Cobb leased, its one-story building covers 5,000 square feet. There are 16 employees, including the owner, who ruefully thinks back to Christmas 1966, the company's low-water mark. "I actually started out a bit bigger than I'd planned. It was challenging. The big corporations weren't sure that we could produce, and our list of past customers was a lot of blank space on the books." Cobb never despaired or panicked. Business gradually picked up and confidence in MDI's capacity for quality workmanship soon spread.

Of all the reasons for Cobb's success, the one that sticks out most conspicuously is his intense drive for creative and experimental work, using both hands and head. This quality goes back to his lean years when he was a boy in Detroit and a student at the old Henry Ford Trade School. After an intensive training course, underprivileged kids were turned out as semi-skilled teens, ready for Ford's four-year apprenticeship program. Cobb entered when he was 14 and finished at 17 in 1942, but, instead of going to work in a plant, he went to work as a U. S. Marine, serving with the all-Negro 51st Defense Battalion which fought at Eniwetok in the Marshall Islands during World War II.

After his stint in the Marines, Cobb enrolled at Detroit's Lawrence Institute of Technology and got his B.S. in mechanical engineering in 1950. Six years later, he came to California to work for North American Aviation Corp. as a design engineer, the first of a string of jobs which would lead to his work at and eventual resignation from Lockheed.

Now 43, short, of medium build and partly bald, Cobb's accomplishments as a mechanical engineer are eyeopening. He conceived a number of design innovations and currently holds patent disclosures on three. A "disclosure" is an idea whose patent is pending. While a draftsman for the Ford Motor Co. in the early '50's, he assisted in developing the design for automated mechanisms which transport motor blocks between machining operations. At North American, he invented a mechanical breather that simulates human breathing. The company, prime contractor for the Apollo space program and corporate colossus in the aircraft and missile fields, uses the device to run tests on high-altitude oxygen masks. Lockheed Propulsion utilized Cobb's talents to help devise a mechanical joint-connector that permits rocket sections to be linked for greater thrust capability.

Another side of Cobb's success story began when he secured the services of his old friend and longtime associate, John Herbert, the white, bespectacled chief engineer at MDI. The two first worked together in 1958 at the Aerojet Corp. in Sacramento in the original Polaris rocket program. They were together again at Lockheed. Herbert is in the final stages of getting patent rights for a stair-climbing wheelchair, an invention inspired by an injury to his father. The original model required a 10-pound arm effort to operate raising and lowering mechanisms, but all-electronic controls are now being incorporated to allow the chair controls to be easily maneuvered.



Most of the male contingent visits a neighbor. Cobb and wife, Dovie, were married in 1947 in Detroit, hometown for both. He was born there, she in Georgia. They came to California in 1956, have lived in three cities besides Riverside.

PANIC DESPITE CHRISTMAS DISAPPOINTMENT

On weekends and after shop hours, Cobb works in his small research laboratory on another potential boon to medical science: liquid polyurethane foam casts for use on broken limbs or in shaping stump sockets for prosthetic devices. Polyurethane, produced in space research as a spray-on insulation in space crafts, is now made by the Upjohn Co. To secure additional benefits from its expenditures, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, through its Technology Utilization Program, constantly searches for ways to use newly-discovered products for civilian uses. However, credit for the use of the chemical in constructing casts belongs to Dr. James Mitchell, a Negro physician in Riverside, who holds a patent on this application. In his process gauze is first dipped into the liquid, then applied to the body where it hardens somewhat like plaster of Paris. It has some advantages over its older method. The finished cast's weight is less than ten per cent of the weight of plaster, but offers an equal restraining rigidity. If necessary to recast, the old cast can be cut away with minimum discomfort to the patient and X-rays taken through the foam casts give a sharper and more detailed picture.

Cobb hopes to complete preliminary studies on the product, as suggested by Dr. Mitchell, and produce it in the form of "instant-cast kits" for field use by the Red Cross, police, disaster workers, Peace Corps volunteers and the armed services.

MDI has a contract with Dr. Mitchell to research and develop polyurethane casts, but work has been slowed by inadequate research staff and money. One encouraging sign is that officials at Rancho Los Amigos Hospital in Downey, Calif., are considering using the casts, notes Cobb, pending further tests and demonstrations. The hospital is one of five U. S. rehabilitation centers for patients whose cure demands long hospitalization.



Despite a full work load, Cobb has served on the Riverside Personnel Board since 1963. It advises the City Council on matters involving city employees. The mild-mannered executive has consistently fought for more jobs for Negroes and Mexicans.

Continued on Next Page

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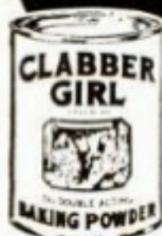
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'MIRACLE' MONEY GAVE COMPANY ITS START

BEFORE GOING into business, Cobb had spent many sleepless nights searching for ways to finance his dream. Some of his savings had gone into short-term real estate investments during Riverside's construction boom years of 1963-65. He had also invested in acreage and commercial rentals in Palmdale and Perris, rural communities with speculative possibilities. None of these ventures, however, brought in the necessary capital to take the plunge. Suddenly a Riverside investor appeared with the necessary balance at the precise moment Cobb was ready to open shop.

Some of this original money was still available for new purchases, but more money would be needed, especially to meet future payrolls. This problem, like most others, was quickly solved. After relatives and old friends in Detroit learned of Cobb's struggling new enterprise, MDI received unexpected, but welcome help. As sizable checks came in the mail, the spectre of failure was warded off. Mrs. Dovie Cobb still shakes her head with wonderment. "It was a miracle. I just broke down and cried."

One of the unique features of the young company is its liberal, employee-oriented hiring policy. Paraphrasing the civil rights deal Cobb displays in his front window at home, the shop welcomes capable workers of any race, religion or nationality. Also, physical handicaps are no barrier. Himself troubled by a gradually-worsening hip arthritis, a reminder of his baseball playing days, Cobb works closely with the State Rehabilitation Board in assembling his shop force. Machinist Jim Lambertson is a case in point. No employer would hire him because of a speech defect that conveyed the mistaken impression that Lambertson was intoxicated. Cobb sloughed off the speech trouble, gave the eager workman a job. The formerly unemployable machinist usually arrives half an hour early, ready to start the day ahead of time.

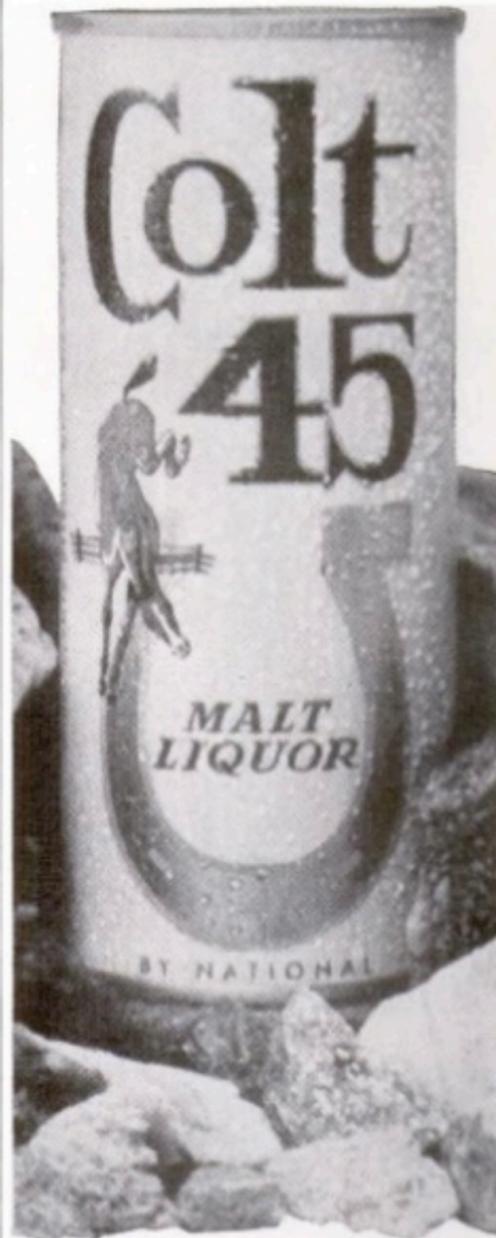
Joseph Biro was another MDI worker who had a problem: He could speak Hungarian, his native tongue, Spanish (because of five years spent in South America), but no English. Cobb's solution was to use office clerk David Ruiz to translate machining information into Spanish for Biro, who had another reason to be grateful to Cobb. Before receiving his naturalization papers, he ran into trouble with immigration officials in Los Angeles, who had instituted deportation proceedings to return Biro to Hungary. Cobb interceded and was able to keep Biro stateside.

Cobb is the only minority-group member on the Riverside Personnel Board, an advisory body to the City Council, and is serving his second three-year term. His business and Personnel Board position give Cobb firmer roots in the community than many Negroes and Mexican-Americans can claim. After moving from Detroit to California and living in Sacramento, Redlands and Los Angeles, the Cobb family is solidly settled in Riverside. After the first year of successful operation at MDI, they expect to be there for a long time. Like other aspects of Lillard's career, life as a company president and owner seems to be pointing upwards.



Assembled on the front lawn of their home, members of Cobb family are (l. to r.) Marvin, 14; Cobb; Mathew, 5; Mrs. Cobb, holding their youngest child, John Martin, born in July; Marcus, 7; Michael, 12; and the only daughter, Dovie Mae, 19.

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